



File Code: 1920

Date: December 2, 2010

Dear Forest User:

Invasive plants are threatening or dominating areas of the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland (MBRTB) with negative impacts on native plant communities, big game winter ranges, sage-grouse habitat, soil and watershed resources, recreation activities, domestic livestock forage availability, and aesthetic values. A shift from native vegetation to invasive plants alters wildlife habitats; decreases wildlife and livestock forage, reduces species diversity, increases soil erosion due to a decrease in surface cover, and promotes undesirable monocultures. For these reasons it is imperative to continue to aggressively manage invasive plants across the MBRTB.

Currently there are existing populations of 26 invasive plant species on the MBRTB, and another eight species are either suspected to occur here or are known to exist within short distances from the MBRTB. Approximately 175,300 acres within the MBRTB are infested with invasive plants, which is about six percent of the total acres. "Infested" acres vary widely, largely due to extreme variations of density of the invasive plants within any given acre (from a few plants to a few dozen plants in some areas, all the way to solid monoculture stands in others). Cheatgrass and Canada thistle occupy the greatest acreages on the MBRTB. Other species of greatest concern for their impacts are leafy spurge; yellow and Dalmatian toadflax; four species of knapweeds; bull, Scotch, and musk thistles; saltcedar (tamarisk); houndstongue; hoary cress (whitetop); ox-eye daisy; and black henbane.

The MBRTB is currently treating noxious weeds and invasive plants under decisions made in the 1996 Management of Noxious Weeds Environmental Analysis (EA). The Forest is proposing to prepare an environmental impact statement (EIS) that would broaden the current management and control of noxious weeds and other invasive plants through the integration of manual, mechanical, biological, and ground and aerial herbicide control methods. The effects analysis of treatments of invasive plants, including cheatgrass and other invasive annual bromes, will be projected over the next 10-15 years, and would:

- Treat infestations through adaptive management tools for assessing new treatments and new sites
- Permit the use of newly developed, more species-specific, EPA-registered herbicides
- Broaden control methods to include the use of aerial application of herbicides where safe and effective ground application is not possible
- Maintain or improve protection measures for herbicide applications

Access to project areas and condition of private lands will be considered during alternative development and when analyzing potential cumulative effects, but no activities are being proposed to occur on private lands. It is anticipated, however, that the Forest Service may receive requests from intermingled and adjacent landowners to be a willing and able partner on projects that might be proposed to treat invasive plant populations that are found on multiple land ownerships that include National Forest System lands.

The purpose of this EIS is to further move toward desired resource conditions outlined in the Forest Plans for the Medicine Bow and Routt National Forests and the Thunder Basin National Grassland Plan by preventing and reducing loss of native plant communities associated with the spread of invasive plant species, which impact many other resources, uses, and values. The need for this EIS is to:



- Protect the natural condition and biodiversity of the MBRTB by preventing or limiting the spread of aggressive, non-native plant species that displace native vegetation.
- Promptly eliminate new invaders (species not previously reported in the area) before they become established, and prevent or limit the spread of established invasive plants into areas containing little or no infestation.
- Protect sensitive and unique habitats including critical big game winter ranges, sage-grouse core areas, and other important habitats.
- Reduce known and potential invasive plant seed sources along roads and trails, within powerline corridors, rights-of-ways, gravel and rock quarries, fuels reduction projects, previously-burned areas, and beetle-killed forests where invasive weeds are already beginning to spread.

Possible alternatives: The MBRTB will consider a reasonable range of alternatives, including a no action alternative. Other alternatives may examine various combinations of invasive plant treatment. Based on the issues gathered during scoping, the action alternatives may vary in the amount and location of acres considered for treatment and the number, type, and location of activity.

Preliminary issues include:

- The current and potential impacts of invasive plant species on natural resources such as critical big game habitat, native plant communities, wilderness values, watersheds, and threatened, endangered, or sensitive species and their habitats.
- Economics, effectiveness, and potential impacts of various control methods on natural resources.
- Potential effects on non-target native plants and associated values, wildlife and fish populations, and human health from the application of herbicides.

The Forest Service published a Notice of Intent (NOI) to prepare an EIS for the invasive plant management proposal in the Federal Register on December 1, 2010. The NOI initiates the scoping process for the analysis and contains more detailed information relative to the proposal. To view the NOI, please visit the Forest Service website at: <http://fs.usda.gov/goto/mbr/projects>. Once in the website, click on “View a Listing of All Projects,” and then click on “Invasive Plant Management Environmental Impact Statement” in the drop down menu. Project area maps may also be viewed at this same site.

To obtain paper copies of the maps or the NOI, or to ask questions about the proposed action and the EIS, you may contact Bob Mountain, Project Coordinator, by e-mail bmountain@fs.fed.us or at 307-745-2411.

Comments about the invasive plant management proposal must be received by **January 18, 2011**.

Please direct written comments to Forest Supervisor, Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and Thunder Basin National Grassland, 2468 Jackson Street, Laramie, Wyoming, 82070. Comments may also be sent via e-mail to comments-rocky-mountain-medicine-bow-routt@fs.fed.us or via facsimile to 307-745-2398. Comments received during the scoping period will assist in identifying issues and concerns and in development of alternatives, but they do not grant standing to the commentors. The Draft EIS is expected to be available for review in May 2011 and the Final EIS is expected April 2012.

Thank you for your interest in the Medicine Bow-Routt National Forests and the Thunder Basin National Grassland.

Sincerely,

/s/ Phil Cruz

PHIL CRUZ

Forest Supervisor

